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Keeping tabs: A journalist's secret dossier

Why did the FBI, CIA watch Penn Kimball?

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VINEYARD HAVEN — Penn T. Kimball is a national security risk, the State Department, FBI and CIA apparently believe.

Since November 1946, the Columbia journalism school professor and summer resident of Martha's Vineyard has been designated as a threat to the national defense — and possibly to apple pie and motherhood. According to the national intelligence agencies, Penn T. Kimball probably doesn't even like baseball.

And now he's gone and started lecturing about his file.

Kimball, 69, told an audience in Vineyard Haven several months ago that he has yet to find to what extent the government considers him subversive. He has managed to recover only 99 documents from the FBI, for example, in the seven years since, on a foggy day in Chilmark, he decided to pursue the contents of his previously secret — and far more extensive — file.

The national intelligence agencies have drafted forests of paper on the man. Investigations started with routine review when he was asked to work in the State Department's foreign office in the 1940s, Kimball says, and subsequent investigations seem to have fed off each other for the ensuing 30 years.

While a reporter at The New York Times, according to the documents, he was named the second-highest-ranking communist at the paper (he claims that he has never been a communist, although he stresses that's beside the point) by a still-unidentified informant in the early 1950s.

Kimball says the government continues to collect intelligence on what may amount to millions of Americans completely ignorant of those investigations — and probably innocent of any subversive activity.

The CIA and FBI returned to him parts of his extensive file, sheaves of documents with countless sections carefully deleted. Other documents have been just as carefully withheld. They all refer explicitly to Kimball as a national security risk for one or another reason, he believes.

Those remaining secret studies, and the words that lie beneath the bold black strokes of censorship across the papers he received, captivate Kimball. And he intends to "make some mischief" — and "to safeguard basic human rights for the hundreds, perhaps thousands, who are in government files like I was."

So Kimball wrote a book about his case, called "The File," published late last year by Harcourt Brace and Jovanich. And he has since brought a \$10-million suit against the government "to make them think twice before they compile another dossier like the one they wrote on me."



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN SHEARER

For almost 40 years, Columbia journalism professor Penn Kimball has been the subject of a federal intelligence file.

Kimball speculates that the file may have cost him a post on the Federal Communications Commission in the early 1960s and a Fulbright Scholarship in 1964. He also believes it may be linked to four IRS audits of his taxes in the last six years.

Other files eventually were started — for no apparent reason — on his late wife, a real estate agent, who died in 1982, Kimball says.

A former Rhodes Scholar and a Marine in the Pacific during World War II, Kimball wrote for Time magazine and The New York Times and worked for two state governors and a senator.

He has taught at the Columbia journalism school for a quarter of a century.

Kimball calls himself "a yellow-dog Democrat (who) spent all my life being critical" of political institutions.

But he says he was nonetheless surprised to read the FBI documents that arrived in February 1978 "in a plain brown wrapper, like other forms of pornography."

Kimball "suddenly discover(ed) that for 32 years I was on the books of the United States government as nothing more or less than a national security risk. The more I thought about it, the less humorous it struck me."

"It was always my impression under due process in this country that when they haul you in and accuse you of something, that you were at least confronted with the person who accused you." Some principal informants in his case, Kimball says, held grudges or had their statements taken out of context by the senior officers of the intelligence divisions.

Kimball called the FBI, CIA and State Department "irresponsible" and "unreliable."

However, he said his chief concern is that access to information be maintained and broadened — in his case so that he can learn the names of those informants, the reasons for the investigations and the methods used to gather information. **He was investigated separately from 1958 through 1960, for example, by the CIA for an unknown purpose and with unknown results.** And Penn T. Kimball wants to know.